

Preserving the Immaterial: The Guggenheim Museum's Variable Media Initiative

Jim Hubbard

MAIN, Spring/Summer 2001

On March 30-31, 2001, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York hosted a conference entitled "Preserving the Immaterial: A Conference on Variable Media." The conference made public for the first time the Guggenheim's Variable Media Initiative - a pioneering effort to explore the issues surrounding, and to find solutions to problems arising from, art made in inherently ephemeral media. This effort is spearheaded by John Hanhardt, the Guggenheim's Senior Curator of Film and Media Arts, and Assistant Curator Jon Ippolito.

The opening night included an arch, yet intriguing keynote address by science fiction writer Bruce Sterling, and a short, dazzling performance by Ken Jacobs called *Bitemporal Vision: The Sea*. Jacobs, using a complex device of his own design, projects two different, but similar images emanating from twin side-by-side projectors (either 16mm analytical projectors or, as in this case, 35 mm filmstrip projectors). The images are interrupted by a propeller-like device placed in front of the projectors and viewed through a special filter placed in front of one eye, thus creating a three-dimensional effect on the screen. Jacobs' projection was recorded by a digital video camera and the video version was then projected. As the video was unfolding, Jacobs reacted, expressing first his surprise at its quality and then his disappointment at its lack of detail and its difference from the film version. The video reduced two images to one and eliminated the rough edges and the sound of the projector. It adequately conveyed the 3-D effect, but did change the image and did not transmit some of the optical illusions. In a touching moment of epiphany, he suddenly realized that his performance could not, in any authentic sense, outlive him.

This is the crux of the dilemma of ephemeral media-based art. We can preserve something of it, but it will, inevitably, be changed. The groundbreaking premise of the Variable Media Initiative is to understand the possible alterations, distill which differences matter most to the artist, and plan accordingly.

The Variable Media Initiative consists primarily of a complex questionnaire that attempts to allow the artist, curators, conservators and other experts to consider and express which aspects of the work need to remain the same and which can be altered without affecting the essential qualities of the work. The questionnaire begins with these scenarios: (1) What is the work in its original incarnation? (2) What could the work be in later incarnations?

Within both scenarios are seven categories: installed, performed, interactive, reproduced, duplicated, encoded and network. For the original state, each category includes a set of parameters. The artist is asked to detail the current state, its allowed variation, and then comment on each issue. For the future, there are four possibilities (reinterpreted, migrated, emulated, and stored) and under each of these we find the seven categories listed above.

For instance, an artist goes to the original version section and then clicks on "installed." Several issues appear, including categories like space, boundary, access, and lighting. Does the work need to appear in a gallery space or a theater? Can that vary? Somewhat, greatly or not at all? The artist is allowed to comment on all installation issues, so that problems not adequately addressed in the multiple choices may be fully explained.

Similarly, in the later re-creation category, the artist might click on "reinterpreted," and then "installed" and find these questions: should the work's appearance be completely reconfigured to fit the exhibition context? Should the work be modified to draw data from the contemporary equivalent of the internet?

In this investigational phase of the Initiative, it should be noted that artists are not directly completing the questionnaire. Instead, curators and conservators are examining these issues with the artists by using the Variable Media questionnaire as a basis for the discussion. (I personally would be happy to fill out the entire questionnaire, if the Guggenheim would buy one of my films!)

This description and these examples only hint at the intricacy and usefulness of the Initiative. The questionnaire is an

excellent - though very complex - method for focusing an artist's attention on those aspects of the work which need to be most enduring. For example, in the case of my own film work, I have always resisted showing it on video. I process my own film, and the look of the film print has never been successfully translated to video. During the Guggenheim Conference, I was speaking to a friend who has been urging me to create gallery versions of some of my work. Under the influence of the Variable Media Initiative, he began asking a series of questions that led us to the realization that what at issue was not fetishizing film or devaluing video. The crux of the matter was COLOR. Any medium able to project the color of the original (or a close facsimile) would be fine with me. (Now, if some museum would undertake making excellent video or digital copies of my work that would effectively convey the color I work so hard to achieve in film, I can die happily)

This first full day of the conference consisted of three sessions devoted to case studies of the Initiative. Each session featured panels of discussants and respondents, with never fewer than nine people on stage- a somewhat frustrating arrangement that left some participants with little time to speak. However, all the participants had examined the works in question during previous non public workshops devoted to the Variable Media Initiative, so they had time to consider the issues involved.

The first session looked at four works of reproducible art: Jan Dibbets' photo collage *A White Wall*, Bruce Nauman's audio installation *False Silence*, Ken Jacobs' *Bitemporal Vision* and Nam June Paik's *TV Garden*. Dibbets' collage consists of 12 photos of a white wall pasted on a board in two rows of six. The photos were taken at different aperture openings so they would present the gradations of a gray scale. Over time, they have mutated, and now look like six white and six dark gray photos. Dibbets elected to reprint the photos, remove the originals from the board and replace them, while retaining the originals for posterity.

For Nauman's installation, the museum is required to build two triangular rooms and a long connecting corridor. At one end of the corridor, an audio tape plays. On the tape Nauman reads a poem. The original recording is on 1 /4 inch reel-to-reel tape and is physically deteriorating. The Guggenheim Museum, which owns the piece, elected to remaster the tape to DAT. The remastering was done in two versions: with filtering and without, and portions of both were played during the presentation. Everyone agreed that the filtered version eliminated too many frequencies and was unacceptably altered. When the museum informed Nauman of the problem, he decided to make a new tape. He sent them a DAT with Joan LaBarbara now reading the poem. This changes the meaning of the piece, to the extent that it still matters in our culture whether a man or a woman is saying something (he also requested at some point a change in the location of the speaker). Of course, the artist has the prerogative to change his work, but it is unclear which version of Nauman's piece will be exhibited in the future.

Nauman's actions expose some knotty philosophical problems for those trying to preserve art, especially the work of living artists. How does one decide which version should be preserved? The original version or a later version? Does the artist really remember what his intentions were? Should the original intentions be privileged or later ones considered definitive? For instance, often when viewing my older work, I see things I would like to change - shots held too long or cut too quickly, edits that are not quite right. If it weren't too much trouble, I would make those changes, but should I? I am sometimes quite unsure of why I did certain things. Should the older self be allowed to edit the younger self? Couldn't this disturb the integrity of the work as easily as it might improve it?

The discussion of Ken Jacobs' work during the first Saturday session reiterated and extended the discussion around the previous evening's performance. This panel also included an examination of the ephemerality of Jacobs' 1969 film *Tom, Tom, the Piper's Son*, which is based on a paper print of a 1905 Billy Bitzer film. It is clear that Jacobs' device, which he calls "The Nervous System," can be maintained for some time. Although the availability of replacement parts and the expense of custom fabrication of unavailable parts will always remain the central problem of machine-based art, his piece can be preserved on film for a good number of years. What cannot be preserved is the nature of his performance. Someone else could perform the piece using the same film and machines, but then it would become like a play or piece of music, and be open to interpretation. Alternatively, one of Ken Jacobs' performances can be recorded on videotape and played for future audiences. This freezes one particular performance as the performance and eliminates the human component.

Nam June Paik's *TV Garden* consists of at least 30 monitors placed within a display of lush greenery. The video work playing on the monitors can vary, but it is usually *Global Groove*. The original installation from 1974, along with installations at the Whitney Museum in New York in 1982, the 11th Sao Paulo Videobrazil Exhibition in 1996, and the

Guggenheim Museum in New York in 2000, were discussed. The vegetation included in the installation must be "standard office plants." But the more interesting question for moving image makers revolves around the nature of the monitors. We discovered that it was through the discussion generated by the Variable Media questionnaire that Paik wanted at least 30 monitors. What kind of monitors should be used? Should they be 1974 era monitors, contemporary monitors or should they be contemporary screens placed in circa 1974 husks? Would using 1974 monitors historicize the piece? No single answer will do. The answer will depend on the nature of the future exhibit. Because of the Variable Media Initiative curators will be aware of these concerns.

The second session focused on performance, and the two pieces involved film. The first was Robert Morris' performance *Site* (1964). The original performance was not filmed and did not include film, but in 1993, Morris allowed filmmaker Babette Mangolte to film the performance. The curmudgeonly Morris complained over and over again that it was not his film. Indeed, the short excerpt shown at the session looked more like a Babette Mangolte film than a Robert Morris performance. The questions arising out of this situation - can a film or video adequately record a performance relate more to the challenges of recording performance than to the preservation of film and video.

Once again, Ken Jacobs' *Bitemporal Vision* was included as a case study. He showed a video, made for a grant application, which displayed the device in his bedroom, and an excerpt from his digital video *Flo Rounds the Corner*. Although an interesting discussion continued by considering his work yet again, the conference, as a whole, would have benefited from exploring the work of other film/videomakers rather than using the same Jacobs example three times.

The third session considered the work of Felix Gonzalez-Torres, especially his candy spills, and Mark Napier's work-in-progress *Net Flag*. Ironically, the VMI, which ultimately will be extremely important for preserving digital work, illuminated the problems and possibilities of the Gonzalez-Torres work far better than it did the Internet-based piece. The solutions proposed for *Net Flag* included clever technological responses, but tended toward the generic, partially because the work does not really exist yet and also perhaps because it does not appear to be a very interesting piece of work.

The most intriguing comments came from Jeff Rothenberg, a computer scientist who advocates the use of emulation (a process that causes a computer to behave like another computer) allowing software designed for one computer to run on another. This strategy is attractive and would solve many preservation problems. But other issues then arise that I wonder about. For example, when the resolution of computer monitors is 1,000,000 x 1,000,000 instead of 1024 x 768, what should be done to display the image then? Should it be postage stamp size or blown up to full screen? If it were full screen, what would it look like? Would you emulate 1024 x 768 as well? And what will happen when computer displays are all three-dimensional? Would it then be emulation or simulation? How will it be possible to display early 21 st century digital work then? Will it matter?

JIM HUBBARD (jimhub@earthlink.net) is a New York based filmmaker, curator, media preservationist and NAMAC board member.

Reproduced by permission. NAMAC *Main* <http://www.namac.org/Newsletter>